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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 001886

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DEPT FOR EUR/FO FOR DAS PEKALA, BRYZA  
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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH PRESIDENT BASESCU

REF: BUCHAREST 1885

Classified By: Ambassador Nicholas F. Taubman for  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: President Traian Basescu provided assurances at a December 20 meeting with the Ambassador that Romania would maintain current force levels in Iraq and Afghanistan and would continue to upgrade the quality of its forces to NATO standards. Basescu also confirmed Romanian interest in organizing a mid-2007 follow-up to the Black Sea Forum. He said that Azerbaijan supported the concept and was interested in pursuing the Nabucco pipeline project as well. Basescu also said that a Qatari delegation had recently expressed strong interest in a planned LNG terminal in Constanta, and that the Emir of Qatar had provided assurances that he would "make the arrangements" with Turkey. Basescu acknowledged that Romania was having a "difficult" time in relations with Moldova, but said that Romanian strategy was to back off and "not interfere" for the next six months "unless the Moldovans ask us." At the same time, he expressed concern about Moldova's long-term viability as an independent state, noting that Moldovan weakness could create an opening for Russia to expand its influence again to the Romanian border. On bilateral defense cooperation matters, Ambassador requested Basescu's cooperation in changing Romanian customs regulations so that U.S. spare parts for Romania's C-130 fleet could be brought into the country rapidly rather than the current 55 days waiting time. On future fighter aircraft procurements, Basescu said Romania would eschew a "European solution" for F-16s, but needed the political cover of a "competitive" price in order to counter critics who would fault Romania for opting for a higher-cost US plane. On Kosovo, Basescu asked that the international community not introduce a Kosovo independence proposal to the parties until after a new government was in place in Belgrade. While Romania would stick to its previous public position regarding Kosovo, once a decision is taken on status, Romania would support it. End Summary.

12. (C) Ambassador accompanied by DCM and Polcouns met December 20 with President Basescu. Basescu prefaced the meeting with a reference to the December 18 special parliamentary session that issued a formal condemnation of communist rule in Romania (septel). Basescu agreed with the Ambassador's characterization of the disruptive tactics of some legislators--including Greater Romania Party leader Corneliu Vadim Tudor--as "Soviet style," adding that it was proof that Romania still had a long way to go to remove all residues of communist rule from politics, business, and the media. Basescu accepted the Ambassador's congratulations for Romania's EU entry by noting that Romania finally was on the "safe side" both from the perspective of economic and political links to the West.

13. (C) Basescu told the Ambassador that the Supreme Council on National Defense (CSAT) had just taken a decision to maintain current force levels in Iraq and Afghanistan for the next 12 months, and to maintain a strategic reserve as well. Basescu added that Romania would continue to upgrade its forces to NATO standards, noting that another two brigades would be "NATO-certified" in the coming year. While underscoring that Romania was a "small country" militarily, Basescu said that America could continue to depend on Romanian forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Darfour, and Haiti as well. Basescu explained Romania's reluctance to participate in the French-led EU mission in Lebanon by noting that the decision was not because of lack of resources, but due to concerns about the risks of undertaking such a mission, Romania's historic "neutrality" in Middle East issues, and sensitivity to the potential reaction of the large Arab population residing in Romania. He added that the economic welfare of some half a million Romanians--many of them overseas workers and their families--depended directly or indirectly on stability in Israel and the region.

14. (C) On Black Sea and energy security matters, President Basescu confirmed Romanian interest in organizing a follow-on event to the Black Sea Forum in the June 2007 timeframe. He said that he had raised the issue with the Azeri President during a recent visit, and that the Azeris were behind the concept. He also confirmed that the Nabucco pipeline and other energy issues had been discussed with the Azeris, remarking that "you can trust them to finalize the deal, not like Yushchenko." Basescu said that a Qatari delegation had recently visited Romania and had expressed strong interest in a planned LNG terminal in Constanta. When queried by Ambassador about the Turkish attitude to this

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plan, including the question of allowing LNG shipments through the Bosphorus, Basescu responded that the Emir of Qatar had promised him that "I will make the arrangements with Turkey." Basescu reported that the Turks were still blocking the Nabucco project, but evinced the hope that Turkey could be turned around "step by step." He said the Turks were also suspicious about whether other countries sought to revisit the Montreux convention. In closing, he noted that Romania had "additional leverage" on the Turks because of their need to show "flexibility" in order to join the EU. Basescu added "we won't use that leverage, of course."

15. (C) Basescu confirmed that Romania was having a "difficult" time in relations with Moldova, but evinced a more relaxed view than Foreign Minister Ungureanu (reftel), remarking that Romania's strategy would be to back off and "not interfere" for the next six months "unless the Moldovans ask us." Basescu said that Voronin's position had changed since the election in Ukraine, and suggested there was a behind-the-scenes Moscow-Chisinau "deal" that traded cheap Russian natural gas and access to the Russian market for better relations with Moscow and a commitment to ratchet up the hostility towards Romania. Basescu admitted concern about Moldova's long-term viability as an independent state, noting that Moldovan weakness provided a possible opening for Russia to expand its influence to the Romanian border in the future. Asked by Ambassador what the USG might do to improve the climate between Chisinau and Bucharest, Basescu responded, "don't play into their game of creating the impression that the problem is with us," adding that "we should let them prove that they are sincere."

16. (C) On bilateral defense cooperation matters, Ambassador underscored the importance of keeping Romania's C-130 fleet airworthy, noting that at present only one (of four) C-130s was flyable. USG ability to help Romania keep its C-130s flying was hampered by delays in customs clearance. "We can ship a spare part within 24 hours," the Ambassador explained, "but Romanian customs requirements add an additional 55

days." Basescu said he would take up the matter with the Defense Minister. He said that he had inquired previously about why more Romanian C-130s were not flyable, and had received the answer from the MOD that the fault lay with on the American side, including the delayed delivery of a refurbished C-130 from Lockheed-Martin.

17. (C) On future fighter aircraft procurements, Basescu said that there was no feasible "European solution" or "British solution" for Romania's fighter aircraft needs, given that Romanian forces would be fighting side-by-side with US forces for the foreseeable future. He said that a decision has been taken to procure F-16s, and at a later point the F-35, for a total of 48 aircraft. Basescu indicated that he needed political cover to counter the expected criticism from EU quarters for not choosing a "European" solution, underscoring that the price of new F-16s had to be "competitive" with that of a new Eurofighter. Basescu also responded enthusiastically to the Ambassador's informal offer to explore the idea of a combined training deployment of Romanian pilots and maintenance crews to an Air National Guard unit in the United States as a way to guarantee that the "F-16 culture" is properly embedded in the Romanian Air Force.

18. (C) On Kosovo, Basescu asked that the United States and the international community hold off on a final status proposal until after a new Serbian government is in place after the January elections, given the potential of a Kosovo independence announcement for destabilizing the Serbian political scene. He cited recent polling showing a drop in support for the Radical Party and continuing support for Tadic and Kostunica. He reported that he was urging the two Serb leaders to move quickly to form a new government, in a timeframe he suggested could be as little as seven to ten days. He added that Romania wanted stability in Serbia given the risk of any resurgence in Balkan conflicts could have a spill-over effect on investment in the region. In closing, Basescu assured the Ambassador that while Romania would continue to hew to its public position regarding Kosovo, Romania would fall into line eventually with the majority approach. "When the decision is taken, we'll be behind the decision," he stressed.

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